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SUBJECT: WALK THE LINE: BETWEEN SYRIA'S SECURITY SERVICES
AND THE OPPOSITION

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche, per 1.4 b,d.

¶1. (C) Summary: Conversations with political contacts, including those in the opposition, point to the variety of techniques used by SARG security services to co-opt or intimidate Syrians. It is often in the middle range, between enticements at one end and threats and coercion at the other, that the security services are at their most effective in curbing dissent and obliging cooperation. One such contact, civil society activist Bassam Ishak, described for Polchief his attempts over the past few years to walk the fine line between cooperating with the security services and maintaining some independence. A useful case study because of the variety of ways in which he has attracted the attention of the security services, Ishak pointed to the different pressure points the services exploit, ranging from routine requests for a permit to run a bookshop to appeals tied to personal ambition, vanity, and patriotism. Ishak also recounts his encounters with senior security officers, including the head of the General Intelligence Directorate, Ali Mamluk. Like other contacts, Ishak noted the expanding list of redlines the government is enforcing against opposition figures as it intensifies its crackdown, leading many to dramatically lower their profiles and avoid actions that will invite even greater security services' demands for cooperation or put activists in danger of facing retribution rather than co-optation. End Summary.

¶2. (C) TO CO-OPT OR INTIMIDATE?: Recurring conversations with political contacts, mostly in the form of asides appended to remarks on other topics, point to the range of techniques used by SARG security services to co-opt or intimidate Syrians. These techniques, at the most accommodating end of the spectrum, include offers of remunerative, prestigious positions and other rewards. At the opposite end they routinely involve coercive measures such as travel bans, surveillance and harassment of both individuals and family members, the threat of detention (without charge), interrogation, and imprisonment after lengthy trials. It is often in the middle range, between enticements and threats, that the Syrian security services are at their most effective, curbing dissent, obliging people to report on their friends and colleagues, and convincing them sometimes to present regime arguments justifying policies or decisions.

¶3. (C) Also of note is the way the security services are able to establish relationships, even relatively collaborative ones, with people in the opposition or those on its margins who are trying to maintain some independence from the regime. One prominent human-rights activist has reported

that he maintains ties with "his people" in the security services as the price for finding room to operate -- and be effective -- in such a repressive society. A very prominent dissident intellectual criticizes the regime publicly but mentioned privately to Charge that he respects one newly appointed senior security official and meets with him occasionally. A former deputy minister acknowledged that he meets regularly with hard-line senior intelligence official Hisham Ikhtiyar, although he sees himself as pro-American and part of the Sunni silent majority opposing the regime. While a few seem to be hoping for eventual high-level appointment or other reward, most, especially in the opposition, seem to be seeking necessary alliances for protection against retribution and to give themselves space to operate. The only Syrians who seem impervious to some level of co-optation or coercion are a handful of the most senior political dissidents who have spent 15-20 years imprisoned in Syrian jails and no longer care much what anyone in the regime thinks about them or their activities.

¶4. (C) A CASE STUDY IN WALKING THE THIN LINE: One contact, civil-society activist and aspiring politician Bassam Ishak, spoke with Polchief about some of these techniques and the ways in which the regime had used them with him. As with many contacts who speak on this topic, Ishak spoke in a strangely matter-of-fact tone that blends pragmatism and discomfort, as well as self-justification and a sense that he alone had worked out a special accommodation with the security services that allowed him to cooperate with them to a certain extent, while maintaining his independence and principles.

¶5. (C) INITIAL CONTACTS FOR "EVERYDAY" MATTER: Ishak fell
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afoul of the security services initially in the course of trying to obtain a government permit, in this case to open a small bookshop. In the late 1990's, he was summoned initially by the security services and told he had to obtain a license to run such a business. After being threatened with punishment and closure, Ishak, the son of Said Ishak, a prominent Christian politician from the northeastern province of Hassake who had served as a deputy speaker of Parliament in the 1950's, said that he managed to "win the officer over." The officer helped him obtain the license and has since become one of his "protectors," said Ishak.

¶6. (C) HELP AFTER VIOLATING A "REG" STRENGTHENS THE BOND: Two years later, Ishak was summoned again for selling "illegal publications," in this case the banned writings of anti-Islamist intellectual Nabil Fayyad. At first, "it was very intimidating. I was afraid and said all kinds of things I did not believe. I just wanted to survive." An acquaintance of Ishak, a businessman who was dating his civil society activist niece, subsequently mentioned to Ishak that he had good contacts in the security services and could put him in touch with "people" who could get the security services off his back. He advised Ishak, "Don't be idealistic. You need to deal with these people." After investigation, his contacts in the General Intelligence Directorate (GID) told Ishak they were satisfied and agreed not to pursue the matter.

¶7. (C) GETTING INTO POLITICS: In 2003, Ishak ran as an independent for Parliament in Hassake province, again attracting the attention of the security services. He was summoned to the Presidential Palace after a series of meetings with supporters in Hassake, a predominantly Kurdish area in northeastern Syria. At the meeting, the interrogating general asked Ishak about his level of Kurdish political support and whether he was willing to "play a middle role" between the government and the Kurds. According to Ishak, the man did not follow up and Ishak let the matter drop. Eventually he lost the election, although he claims the SARG fixed the results.

¶8. (C) CHATTING WITH MAMLUK: Since then, Ishak has maintained ties to the security services, eventually meeting GID chief General Ali Mamluk on several occasions. For example, when he planned a recent trip to the northeast to sound out potential political supporters, he briefed "his contacts" at GID ahead of time. He described them as senior people just under the level of Mamluk. Ishak told them he planned to urge the Kurds to support his political views, which argued for an inclusive, secular Syrian (but not exclusively "Arab") nationalism. He was told that the GID leadership, including Mamluk, completely distrusted the Kurds and believed they harbored secret separatist sentiments, but that he was free to make the visit.

¶9. (C) Ishak said that he has been pressured to continue seeing Mamluk periodically, noting that his most recent contact was in early May. He described Mamluk as "very tough and intimidating," not someone used to dealing with nuance or qualified assent. Ishak told Polchief he usually reached an impasse with Mamluk rather quickly and had to deal subsequently with subordinates who brought Mamluk around, persuading the GID chief to allow Ishak room to maneuver.

¶10. (C) A SLIDE TOWARDS CO-OPTATION: At some point in his dealings with GID, Ishak agreed to give them the gist of what was discussed at meetings he attended, but intimated that he had placed some limits on how much he would say or in revealing identities of others. Ishak was told about certain "redlines," the most important of which was traveling abroad to attend meetings that included Israelis. He said he was also told it was "OK to criticize the government but not to attack it." In late April, he had received a message "from Mamluk" that he should not be in contact with any "foreign opposition."

¶11. (C) AND A MOVE TOWARDS THE OPPOSITION: When Ishak became the spokesperson for a human rights organization in the past year, he was brought in for more questioning. Mamluk was clearly furious and questioned how he could join a human rights organization and shift to the opposition. The meeting ended badly. In a follow-up with his GID handlers, he was offered a position as head of a planned SARG-run human rights organization, which he turned down. His GID contacts

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seemed mystified by his refusal, questioning what he wanted if not a well-paid position. At this and other meetings, Ishak said he tried to make clear that he saw his position "in the middle, between the opposition and the government."

¶12. (C) SMI GETS IN THE ACT: In mid-April, Ishak was summoned by a senior officer at Syrian Military Intelligence, who questioned him about a planned trip to Hassake. Ishak speculated that SMI chief Asif Shawkat was briefed on the meeting because his GID contacts told Ishak that Shawkat talked about the questioning at a subsequent inter-security forces meeting that Mamluk attended. Mamluk was described as angry and jealous that SMI had questioned Ishak.

¶13. (C) . . . AND A JEALOUS MAMLUK RETALIATES: After that rough spot, a working-level GID officer called Ishak, saying they just wanted to start a routine biographical folder and needed to ask him some basic questions. After rattling off several pedestrian inquiries, the officer asked if Ishak had ever committed a felony. When Ishak said no, the officer followed up, asking if he was sure. Ishak saw the call as a reference back to the investigation for selling illegal books, a matter he had been told was closed. It was meant as a threat, to blackmail him, since with the accusation of a felony against him, his political reputation would be destroyed, along with any hopes of running for Parliament in ¶2007. He terminated the call and later complained to his senior-level GID contacts who apologized and said to forget about the questions, which were "not serious." Ishak said he was convinced that the call had been orchestrated by Mamluk -- still angry about his questioning by SMI -- as a

not-so-subtle reminder of the hold GID had over him.

¶14. (C) NO REGRETS?: While his body language betrayed a bit of discomfort, Ishak told Polchief that he does not regret trying to reach some kind of understanding with the security services and the government. While he is critical of the regime, he believes the opposition, of which he considers himself a sincere member, does not have the sophisticated political experience needed to alternately challenge and engage the regime. He claimed that his closest associates in the opposition, who know of his political ambitions, have encouraged him to run for Parliament in 2007 so that he could play such a balancing role. Ishak said his senior GID contacts, just below Mamluk, have similarly encouraged him to pursue these ambitions because of the importance of having his secular political message heard in Syria.

¶15. (C) COMMENT: Civil society and the opposition in Syria obviously receive special attention from the security services, but groups and individuals across the board have to find ways of dealing with their pressures. Ishak's case is special because it highlights several of the different pressure points the SARG security services use to ensnare people and because he moves so fluidly, and apparently sincerely, in the gray areas between opposition and the regime. The weird interplay between security officers and their targets, sometimes involving threatening, cajoling, or offering rewards, occasionally blending in officers' sympathy, targets' understanding, and both parties' wary appreciation for family, class, or ethnic considerations that might influence the encounters, is also on much fuller display than usual here. However, the tactics and compromises evident in Ishak's case, are replicated in the cases of politicians, journalists, academics and a range of other Syrians. The pressure on these groups to cooperate with the security services is likely to increase in the coming months as the crackdown on the opposition continues and as the SARG -- with its hard-liners in control of foreign and domestic policy -- continues to eliminate any middle ground between regime supporters and the opposition.

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